Khaled Saghieh

1990s Beirut: *Al-Mulhaq*, Memory, and the Defeat

"Speak Into The Mic, Please" is an essay series that will be published serially in e-flux journal *throughout 2019. The text below by Khaled Saghieh is the first essay in the series, for which I have the honor of serving as guest editor.*

The title of the series comes from Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué's performance Biokhraphia *(2002), in which Majdalanie speaks to a recorded version of herself that is constantly reminding her to speak into the mic in order for the audience to hear her better.*

In a similar move of speaking to the self in front of an audience, the commissioned texts in this series will attempt to look at the conditions of production surrounding the contemporary art scene in Beirut since the 1990s, taking into account the backdrop of a major reconstruction project in the city, international finance, and political oppression, whether under the Syrian regime or under hegemonic NGO discourses.

The various texts will examine the interconnections between the economic bubbles and the political and cultural discourses that formed in Lebanon between the 1990s and 2015. During this period, a number of private art institutions, galleries, and museums popped up in the capital, while the city was buried under garbage due to years of political mismanagement and corruption.

This apocalyptic image – institutionalization paralleling ecological catastrophe – is historically framed around two periods in Lebanon when attempts to construct "optimism" in the country failed: the 1950s, which was the period of nation-state building that followed independence; and the 1990s, which was the period of post–civil war reconstruction, privatization, and "neoliberal optimism."

The year 2015 also marked roughly twenty years of building the contemporary cultural scene in Beirut. This scene began with artists' initiatives, public art exhibitions, and a critical discourse that was informed by, among other things, the migration of leftist thought and traditions into the cultural realm at the end of the so-called Cold War, when the Lebanese Left's political project was defeated. Where do we stand today in relation to these politics and discourses?

Khaled Saghieh's "1990s Beirut: Al-Mulhaq*, Memory, and the Defeat" explores the collective discourse of memory that emerged in this cultural scene in the 1990s, parallel to an existing historical-materialist discourse that framed the city's reconstruction project as class-based dispossession and land appropriation. For its part, the Lebanese cultural scene battled against processes of erasure and amnesia that it saw as intrinsic to the project.*

The origin of this essay series traces back to

a project initiated by the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in 2016. Titled "WDW25+," the project was an attempt by Witte de With to formalize its archive and to historicize its activities as an arts center. I was invited by Defne Ayas and Natasha Hoare to engage with the institution's archival holdings related to "Contemporary Arab Representations," a curatorial project initiated in 2001 by the center's former director Catherine David. The project involved researching and exhibiting the work of cultural and aesthetic practitioners from various Arab cities, including Beirut.

Marwa Arsanios, *What Representations?*, 2016. Installation view at Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art. Photo: Aad Hoogendoorn.

With this essay series, I do not intend to focus on a specific geographical area, as Catherine David did at Witte de With. Rather, I want the series to serve as a launching pad to tackle broader mechanisms of contemporary art. In addition, my aim is to go beyond the discourses that mystified cultural and artistic projects in the 1990s, shedding light on and undoing certain (liberal) ideologies that shaped that period and its remnants today.

I would like to thank Natasha Hoare, Defne Ayas, Ghalya Saadawi, Tony Chakar, Hanan Toukan, Hisham Ashkar, and Walid Raad – all of whom participated, directly or indirectly, in the conversations surrounding my Witte de With project, and some of whom will also contribute a text to this series.

– Marwa Arsanios

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> Place: the former Martyr's Square
>
> Time: Sunday, April 26, 1992.
>
> We are inside a car lurching through the Beirut dawn, climbing the trenches toward Martyr's Square. We turn the radio on to chants of the Easter mass: "Hark, ignite a flame from the light that does not go out." The sound vanishes into the resounding implosion.
>
> We enter the Square but do not find the Square.
>
> The roar of bulldozers drowns out the faint moan of stone buildings pulverized by dynamite. Like a man taking a bullet in his spine, a building buckles before collapsing in a rumble surrounded by the void. The drone of silence. Dust rises to cover faces and hands. The bulldozer mounts the debris, and the moaning of things dying begins.[1]

These words, with which the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury opens his editorial "The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future" in the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar*'s weekly cultural supplement, *Al-Mulhaq* (The supplement),[2] might have been written during the Civil War to describe destruction wrought by warring militias. In fact, they were written in May 1992, more than two years after the end of the war, not to describe scenes of battle destruction, but rather to describe a construction site in downtown Beirut. The editor-in-chief of *Al-Mulhaq* was certainly well aware of what he was doing in borrowing the vocabulary of annihilation to describe reconstruction, for he follows: "So ends the war in Beirut. / The war ends with war, or what looks like it."[3]

It was, then, a new war following the war that preceded it, "the bulldozer of peace taking over from the bulldozer of war,"[4] whose victims were no longer people but rather structures and buildings. Khoury did not recoil from depicting these buildings as flesh and blood, kneeling, bowing, crying out in pain. By way of this image, the reconstruction project becomes a war not on buildings, but on the city's memory. War for the sake of forgetting.

This editorial, which announced the onset of a war waged by the "bulldozer of the future," did not appear in isolation. It was accompanied in the same issue by an exclusive document outlining "An Alternative Vision for the Reconstruction of Beirut," signed by an elite group of Lebanese architects.[5] The letter demanded restrictions on the role granted to any real estate company in handling the reconstruction, and a reconsideration of the downtown commercial center as a place capable of bringing together all Lebanese, with respect for the societal fabric and history of the city of

Ali Cherri, *Trembling landscape (Mekkah)*, 2016. Lithographic Print and Archival Ink Stamp. 70 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès.

Beirut instead of luxurious, pretentious plans unbefitting of the city's memory. Because of its contents and the stature of its signees, the document was received as a kind of declaration of the principles of battle against the official reconstruction project of downtown Beirut, which consisted of the establishment of a real estate company that claimed property ownership in the central district, with businessman Rafik Al Hariri poised to take over the office of prime minister.[6]

It is possible to consider this issue of *Al-Mulhaq* as foundational in launching the debate over memory that would occupy a wide portion of the Lebanese cultural scene in the 1990s. The debate's main directive was confronting Hariri's reconstruction project that would confiscate the city center. Although *Al-Mulhaq* was not a mainstream publication, it was the most prominent cultural platform of the postwar period. Along with its sister institution Beirut Theater, whose artistic director was Khoury himself, *Al-Mulhaq* was capable of fundamentally shaping the forms and contents of the cultural discourse of dissidence in Beirut at the time – at the forefront of which was the discourse of memory. Beirut Theater acted as an artistic laboratory for *Al-Mulhaq*'s theses, and *Al-Mulhaq* opened space for debating the theater's experiments.

Today, in recounting this fraught decade, it is useful to recall: What were the major features and contradictions of this Lebanese version of the discourse of memory that had been spreading around the world since the 1980s? What granted this discourse such power of attraction among the cultural circles of dissidence of 1990s Beirut?

Memory / Reconstruction

The Chehabi era (named after Fouad Chehab, president of the Republic from 1958 to 1964) can be considered the final attempt to reform the sectarian regime of Lebanon. With the failure of this experiment, the leftist tradition came to dominate the discourse of dissidence, which was committed to the Palestinian Cause, class struggle, and the demands for democracy and secularism. These ideas were articulated in 1973 in the provisional program of the Lebanese National Movement, an alliance of Lebanese leftist and pan-nationalist parties. Eventually, however, this movement relinquished its demand for secularism at the request of the Lebanese Communist Party, which feared alienating Muslim communities that were otherwise supportive of its the demands of the movement.

Although the National Movement's rivals suffered defeat during the Civil War, intellectuals on the Left emerged from the war with scars that are not to be underestimated. They had experienced the shock of their ideas transforming from solidarity in class struggle into sectarian bloodshed. As a result, some of them undertook fundamental revisions of the underlying principles of their thought, others joined sectarian parties or found solace in the reconstruction project, while others chose to withdraw temporarily from public affairs as long as sectarian conflict prevailed. But no sooner had the train of peace begun to move, than those in this latter group found themselves confronted by the neoliberal wave then washing over the globe, which, in Lebanon, took on a clear face and name: Harirism and the reconstruction project. It was an ideal moment for the return of a leftist discourse no longer weighed down by the burdens of war, which therefore could critically confront this new global phenomenon with its brazen local face.

Here the discourse of memory arrived, like a saving grace, allowing a critique of neoliberalism in a new language that was not completely worn out by war, nor stripped of all attraction and credibility by the fall of the Soviet Union. This new language also appeared to harmonize with the global climate, wherein discourses of memory, transitional justice, and reconciliation seemed to be the only suitable lenses for comprehending conflict and its resolution in the wake of the Cold War and the so-called End of History. This is perhaps the chief importance of *Al-Mulhaq*'s role in this period, in that it paired this global discursive trend with the leftist tradition of dissidence in Lebanon. Thus, in the same editorial in which he launches the battle of memory, Khoury goes on to describe the long metal arm of the bulldozers as a symbol of "the new world order invading Beirut aboard a bulldozer," and accompanies his essay with a greeting to the workers on the occasion of the International Worker's Day – the bulldozer is also the bulldozer of power, rendering us all prey to poverty.[7]

But in order for memory to become the new nursemaid of the same leftist tradition, traditional Marxist priorities had to be overturned. Economic transformations no longer formed the underlying basis of Lebanon's postwar culture; the new principal concern was instead the process of memory erasure, with economic dimensions seen as mere extensions of this process. Thus, in an article that appeared in *Rive*, a journal published by the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED), and reprinted in *Al-Mulhaq*, Khoury wrote that the economic dimension of reconstruction, despite its importance, did not represent the essence of what was taking place in Beirut.[8] It is true that a neoliberal economic vision enabled a private

company to grab hold of the city center, unleashing rampant real estate speculation, but this was no more than a reflection of the emergence of a prevailing alliance between the major capitalists and the leaders of former militias. As for the basic pillar of this alliance, it was in fact the law of general amnesty, which did not so much grant forgiveness for war crimes as attempt to erase the war itself, leaving only the option to forget. Forgetting was the fundamental condition that permitted the princes of war to become princes of peace.

In this way, economic tragedy – the impoverishment of the Lebanese people combined with the eviction of the citizens of Beirut from their city – came as the natural result of the eviction of their memory. Khoury deployed the binary of destruction and construction as a symbol of this process. The destroyed buildings were the last witnesses to be obliterated. As for the new buildings that towered in their place, these were not merely buildings, but rather “the city wall protecting the class of speculators and the princes of war.”[9]

Memory, then, appeared as the discourse capable of criticizing the neoliberal encroachment, and thus of preserving the legacy of the Left against the disfigurements of war. It was also the radical dissident discourse, capable of getting to the heart of the postwar regime structure, rather than merely contenting itself with economic ramifications. Indeed, those who did engage in an economic critique of the reconstruction at the time were not the most radical elements of the opposition, but rather the opposition wing within power, namely those associated with the *As-Safir* newspaper.[10] In this newspaper, with its ties to the Syrian regime and to the wing that rivaled Hariri’s for power, a great many headlines appeared about dangerous privatization projects, the stripping of resources from the poor, the tremendous profits flowing to the Solidere company, the fears of mortgaging the country to foreign creditors, the arbitrary fluctuations in real estate prices, and the objections of rights-holders in the commercial district.[11] When the owner and editor-in-chief of *As-Safir*, Talal Salman, investigated the political interests that lay behind this “class war,” he did not find them in the Lebanese regime itself, but rather in obscure insidious projects contrived against the region. Thus, on the day after the laying of the first brick in the reconstruction of the city center, Salman commemorated this occasion in his own way, with an editorial under the title “Goodbye Beirut,” in which he mourned the passing of his capital, whose reconstruction signaled its total subjugation to the ruling forces of the new Middle East.[12]

Memory / War

However, the marriage between the discourse of memory and the discourse of the Lebanese Left was also accompanied by a shift in the definition of memory itself. In the first issues of *Al-Mulhaq*, which resumed publication on March 14, 1992, the war occupied the publication’s front-page images and articles. The first cover featured a special report on four fighters-turned-poets, who narrated their experiences in the war: how they joined the militias, the battles they fought in, the disillusionment they took away.[13] But over time, as more and more issues were published, the memory in question was no longer the memory of war, but instead became the memory of prewar Beirut. And as more and more pages were devoted to architecture and architects, the war was relegated to a series of interviews titled “How Do We Write the History of the Lebanese War?” It seemed as though reconstruction was now the province of memory; as for the war, it had become the province of history.

This leap has a number of important implications, especially since Lebanon had only just emerged from its war, and since Elias Khoury himself had, in the 1980s, built his narrative project on the role of literature as the guardian of memory – on the very necessity of writing about war as a means of fixing it in the collective memory. This conceptual endeavor first materialized in the form of self-criticism in his 1981 novel *White Masks*, a critical experiment that he did not pursue in his later work. Once reconstruction was underway, Khoury turned the page on his criticism of the war. His discourse of memory shifted toward the city as it began shaking off its rubble, rather than toward the war itself.

Unlike Khoury’s generation, which witnessed the clamor of the 1960s and whose political consciousness evolved within the contradictions of the vibrant city of Beirut, the next generation – the “war generation” – had barely known prewar Beirut. Its political consciousness materialized during the Civil War itself. It was not surprising, then, that this war generation was baffled at the form of memory advocated in *Al-Mulhaq*. For them, war was the real memory, not Beirut. The poet and former fighter Youssef Bazzi in particular expressed this bafflement when he wrote in *Al-Mulhaq* condemning his friend Rabih Mroué, then a budding theater director, for collaborating with Khoury on the production of the play *Al-Raml Prison* (Sand prison), whose events take place in 1940s Beirut.[footnote The title of *Al-Raml Prison* refers to a real prison of the same name. The play was based on Khoury’s novel *Majma’ Al Asrar* (Mysterious secrets, 1994; not translated into English). It was staged at the Beirut Theater in

Marwan Rechmaoui, *Blazon,* 2015. Hand embroidery and applique on textile, laser cut brass on stainless steel shields. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.

1995, directed by Mroué and starring Roger Assaf. The novel was adapted for the stage by Mroué and Khoury.] Bazzi conceded the attraction, even superior attraction, of the discourse proposed by Khoury in *Al-Mulhaq* and in the play. But this did not stop him from objecting bitterly:

> There is a story before that of the bulldozer: that of the tank. Let us tell the story from the beginning. But no. What passed has passed, we are the children of today, yet – God, Beirut! How we miss your golden days, how we mourn those golden days ... The misery of this logic is the product of delusions of salvation and innocence, a shirking of all responsibility. Surely we are acting, but on Elias's stage, the acting is painless, exonerating, comforting.[14]

But was the discourse of memory truly exonerating?

The city's discourse of memory, as presented by *Al-Mulhaq*, did not disavow the idea of the war; in fact, it actively and insistently defended it, or more precisely, it defended the war narrative upheld by the traditional Lebanese Left. This narrative maintained two distinct periods of the war, the first lasting until the Israeli invasion of 1982. It was conceived as a period in which the war had a principled aspect, followed by a second period when it degenerated into a senseless war devoid of any principles or noble causes.

In a piece that appeared in *Al-Mulhaq* titled "Against Forgetting," Roger Assaf, the pioneer of *hakawati* (storytelling) theater in Lebanon, wrote the following:

> I do not wish to amputate my memory.
>
> I will not forget the barricades; on these I stood, in these I dreamed of freedom.
>
> I will not forget Palestine and the freedom fighters, in whose camps I came of age, in whose shadows I found myself.
>
> I will not forget Beirut, whose trials and steadfastness I lived, whose conflicts, whose execution, I witnessed.
>
> I refuse today to let images of parties, militias, and factions plunder the truths of those who struggled and fought, who stood fast and died for the cause, who dreamed and believed, hoped and ached.
>
> I will not accept the obfuscation of the truth of the unswerving faith that motivated us, even if eclipsed by the sectarian confusion pervading our country, poisoning our speech, and disfiguring our religion.
>
> It is easy now to condemn the war. But the war was the cradle granted to us. I will not disown it. I will not deny the ideas and knowledge that arose within it. But I was not among its victors, nor will I exploit it.[15]

In the same spirit, Khoury wrote an editorial titled "In Defense of the War," in which he argued that the memory of the war should not be turned into an opportunity for self-renunciation and bemoaning.[16] Khoury's point was that both the Right and the Left entered the war to struggle over distinct social and political projects, not out of a love for killing. For that reason, according to Khoury, rather than disowning the war, it would be more becoming to put our efforts toward discerning the point at which the war mutated from a political struggle into sectarian slaughter. This question, which seems at first to be driven by a desire to condemn the transformation of political conflict into violence, gives way, at the end of the article, to a different question:

> Why and how were both Lebanese war factions, the Lebanese Front[17] and the National Movement, defeated? How did these two factions fracture after the defeat, namely in the years 1986 and 1987, into sects and tribes and splinter groups, setting the stage for a war waged in the streets, within religious denominations, on people's doorsteps?

Here, Khoury seems to support the notion that the phase before the Israeli invasion of 1982 was a period of "honest war," involving conflict between two political projects; this is despite the fact that the years 1975 and '76, when the National Movement and the Lebanese Front were in their heyday, saw the most hideous massacres and the first identity-based and sectarian mass murders. He writes as if those massacres were still part of the "dream" of the old city, rather than a part of its destruction.

Khoury, in fact, wasn't alone in this maneuver. On October 10, 1998, an article titled "The Left in Lebanon: Does it Earn its Title?" appeared in *Al-Mulhaq*.[18] Its authors asked a number of thinkers on the Left whether the war had been a tactical mistake to be avoided in the

future. A positive answer is given to this question, but, as the authors observe, the renunciation of violence does not appear to include any critical revision of the intellectual background that fostered it. In general, as far as the Left was concerned, the program of democratic reforms put forward by the Lebanese National Movement in the 1970s remained valid, although it was on the basis of this very program that the National Movement had plunged into war.

War / Construction

The play *Ayyub's Memoirs*, written by Khoury and directed by Roger Assaf, was staged at Beirut Theater on the fiftieth anniversary of Lebanon's Independence in 1993. *Ayyub's Memoirs* embodied this combination of the narrative of war and the discourse of memory. The play merged the city's history of struggle in the face of the Israeli invasion in the summer of 1982 with the disillusionment and defeat wrought by bulldozed buildings that covered over not just the ruins of the Lebanese Civil War, but also the forgotten stories of women whose men had disappeared in the conflict. Thus, the tragedies of civil war and the tragedies of reconstruction become one in Ayyub's narration of his life story – beginning with his participation in the Arab Salvation Army in 1948 and leading up to 1982 and his writing of slogans of steadfastness on the city's walls.

In keeping with the same theme, *Al-Mulhaq* did not hesitate to link Israel to the erasure of memory that 1990s Beirut witnessed, so that this erasure in fact became an extension of a plan initiated with the Israeli invasion of 1982. When Solidere undertook the destruction of heritage buildings earmarked for rehabilitation, *Al-Mulhaq* referred these events back to 1982, as if to establish a history for this violence; back then, bulldozers belonging to Hariri had been tasked with removing the rubble left in central Beirut by the Israeli invasion. According to *Al-Mulhaq*, under the guise of removing rubble, the bulldozers also removed perfectly sound buildings in anticipation of a "dubious" reconstruction project already underway:

> Fall 1982, Beirut has not yet awoken from the nightmare of Israeli blockade and the bulldozers have destroyed the Abu Nasr, the Sagha, and the fish markets.
>
> April 1996, the Israeli air force, accompanied by warships and artillery, levels the south, Operation Grapes of Wrath triggers massacres, mass exodus, and death. And the bulldozers have destroyed ten heritage buildings in the neighborhoods of Wadi Abu Jamil and Zuqaq Al-Blat.[19]

The character of Ayyub in Assaf's play was able to narrate his memoirs as an embodiment of the city's dream. He spoke of its resistance in the face of the nightmare represented by sectarian wars and reconstruction in the period from 1948 to 1982. Just like Ayyub, the authors of "The Left in Lebanon" were shocked by the failure of anyone on the Left to look into "the internal role that this resistance played in igniting internal strife," and how subsequently, they failed to see any fault in the proliferation of weapons among Hezbollah in peacetime.[20]

In returning to the aforementioned article in *Rive* journal, it becomes evident that while new buildings were demonized for providing a protective wall for the postwar ruling class, older buildings were glorified through the attribution of positive symbolic power:

> Crumbling like cardboard, the buildings alone bore witness to the dream of a city, who strove for its war to be part of the search for a new beginning, democratic and secular, in a Lebanese society ripped apart by sectarianisms, intolerance, and divisions. The buildings were the last guardians of the idea of pluralism, when the tanks had crushed the bodies of those who had tried to defend it.[21]

Once again, then, the discourse of memory is deployed to justify the discourse of the Left, whose only sin was to attempt pluralism, democracy, and secularism. This discourse represents the spirit of the old city, which strove to make its war a step along the way towards realizing its dream. But then the tanks (never driven by leftist pluralists?) crushed that dream.

Thus the picture becomes complete: the discourse of memory did not skip over the war, but rather transformed it into a way station in the long struggle of Good (the secularists and democrats, symbolized by the old buildings of the city) against Evil (Israel and the sectarian tribalists and capitalists, symbolized by the bulldozers and the new, ever proliferating high-rise buildings).

The Intellectual in Crisis

Despite the contradictions carried by the discourse of memory in Lebanon, part of its appeal stemmed from its relative independence from the official parties on the Left, which, like all Lebanese political parties, emerged from the Civil War with their reputation badly damaged. The discourse of memory, unlike the contents of traditional leftist discourse, was upheld by a

cultural platform – architects, theater directors, and intellectuals – during a time when intellectuals were expected to fulfill the role of political actors, or at least as a "conscience" capable of participating in redressing the failure of the political system.

Between the end of 1994 and the end of 1995, for example, four major political statements signed by intellectual groups were published – that is, on average one statement every three months. The statements dealt with issues such as corruption, the building of a state based on law, the rejection of a constitutional amendment extending the term for the president of the republic, and a solution to the issue of the Civil War's disappeared. Not to mention the cultural encounters dedicated to the topic of censorship, especially banning books and tampering with artworks, and extending to postal surveillance and judicial proceedings against artists.

Al-Mulhaq gave great prominence to all these issues, waging its battles from the perspective of a fundamental belief in the role of the intellectual in public affairs. Even when *Al-Mulhaq* published the famous conversation "We Are Not the Salt of the Earth" between Jean Ziegler and Régis Debray, Khoury wrote an explicit rejection of the notion of the "end of the intellectual," arguing that a distinction must be maintained between the situation in the West and that in the Third World, where the basic battle lies in distinguishing between "intellectuals and dogs":

> The fundamental battle lies in asserting the difference between intellectuals and dogs. This framing of the issue might at first induce smiles, but it is of great importance on the metaphorical level. The media's marketing of the idea of the "end of the intellectual," or the technical intellectual, alongside the proliferation of the cultural apparatus that purchases the silence of intellectuals by way of buying their "free" research, and the insistent promotion of the intellectual as worshipper on the altar of the market, are not incidental phenomena. Today, these notions have become an octopus with many arms and legs, alienating culture from its enlightening role, and/or imposing upon it a complacency that approaches betrayal. This discrimination between intellectuals and dogs comes from a concrete examination of the struggle waged by culture in the postcolonial Third World, for the sake of the ideas of justice and freedom.[22]

The political role of the intellectual was not safe from criticism within *Al-Mulhaq* itself. In an issue whose cover bore the headline "Politics and Intellectuals," Bilal Khbeiz criticized the representation of the intellectual's integrity as an alternative to a political program. He noted, quite cannily, that the most telling sign of the stagnation of political life in Lebanon was the space allocated by newspapers to intellectuals' statements that never go beyond their "proscribed ceiling."[23]

But all parties had to wait until 1998 for the crisis of the intellectual, and of the dissident discourse, to unravel. That year, it became clear that Hariri's economic project was facing significant crises. Neither those who raised the discourse of memory to confront the bulldozer, nor the unions that suffered painful blows throughout the 1990s, were able to take advantage of Hariri's blunders. Only the security apparatus, with its strong ties to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, was able to benefit from this climate of opposition. Indeed, the army leader Emile Lahoud was elected president of the republic, and a group of intellectuals and prominent names on the Left – some that *Al-Mulhaq* defended and endorsed for pivotal roles – rallied around the "coup" under the banner of radical economic policy change. The appointment of an intellectual like Georges Corm, one of the theorists and economists who consistently contributed to *Al-Mulhaq*, to the office of minister of finance further signaled this promised change.

Soon after, this project for economic change revealed its emptiness, and little remained of it aside from its iron hold on security. Khoury published a letter of censure addressed to his friend Georges Corm, in which he enumerated the causes for bitterness and disillusionment in this new mandate, and confronted Corm with only one question: "Why didn't you resign?"

> Is it true that you were all unable to resign? Is it true that you were like prisoners? Or is it that the reformist project cannot be designed by the military apparatus, but must start as a project against them, for the sake of presenting an alternative to the barbaric capitalism and militia clientelism that have joined forces since the Taif Agreement, an alliance that held sway all along, even if it appeared to end with the election of General Lahoud?[24]

Thus, with the end of the 1990s, the fundamental struggle was no longer against the "barbaric capitalism and militia clientelism" that formed the basis of the erasure of memory, or what Khoury had called five years earlier "the ruling

political alliance uniting the remains of the war militias with the great capitalists." Rather, the necessary struggle was now against the security apparatus and militarism, powers that regarded Hariri with suspicion but lost no sleep over the discourse of memory. The proponents of the discourse of memory upheld a binary of Good and Evil that failed to detect any sign of the security apparatus that would bare its fangs beginning in 1998. Their professed secularism was ill-equipped for sensing the seeds of the new sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shias that would later explode.

The End

Elias Khoury did not wait on anyone else to announce the defeat, but rather did it himself, and early at that. In March 1998, nearly five years after he inaugurated the battle of memory, and in the face of the impending threat to destroy the small fishing port of Ain Mreisseh, Khoury stood before the scene of bewildered fishermen to mourn the discourse of memory:

> We have written so much about memory. Then what?
> Our memory became our texts on memory. And we got sick of it.
> We tried to talk about things obliquely …
>
> We did not say that the greed of war princes, money kings, and oligarchs has transformed in peacetime into a pack of whales devouring everything.
>
> Instead, we spoke of architecture, we defended heritage, we conversed about culture. We said, "How could you! Unacceptable!," like students in a nuns' school, not knowing what to say to the hooligans hurling stones at us. We were like intellectuals trying to create a cultural conscience in the middle of a savage jungle.
>
> So we emerged with our harvest: a memory of memory, while the whales devoured the city whole. We tried metaphor, euphemism, simile, all forms of rhetoric and eloquence, so as to say everything in an apolitical language …
>
> No, it is not the past. It is not memories. It is not the longing for Ottoman-style buildings bulldozed into the sea.
>
> It is not cultural values that are being squandered and profaned.
>
> No.
>
> I stood at Ain Mreisseh port and saw how the whales try to swallow the sea.[25]

It is as if Khoury here is not merely declaring defeat in the battle of memory against the bulldozer, but also stating, in what is perhaps a confessional mode, that the discourse of memory was never anything but a language game that failed to confront the whales of capital and the princes of war, who now devour the city.

From this point on, the discourse of memory consisted merely of a defense of a building here or a building there, or the gathering of personal archives that might preserve something of a vanished past, never to return. Khoury moved on to new battles. Georges Corm waited a few months, then retorted, accusing those working against the security apparatus of impeding the process of reform.[26] Roger Assaf brought the bulldozer onto the stage one final time, for his play *The Sanayeh Garden*, turning it into a gallows announcing the death of the city.[27] This time, however, the response to the play did not come from a Harirism on its way out of power, but rather from his students, who came from the "war generation." Rabih Mroué had finally listened to the advice of his friend, it seemed; he did not launch his revolution in the face of Elias, but in the face of his drama teacher. Along with Tony Chakar, Lina Saneh, and Walid Sadek, he issued a shared letter criticizing *The Sanayeh Garden*. What these four authors issued was not so much an article, as something closer to a collective letter of resignation – resignation from theater as mirror of reality, and resignation from the binaries of power/victim, and bulldozer/citizen.[28]

Each bid farewell to the discourse of memory in their own way. As for the 1990s? For the generation to come next – the generation to which the writer of these lines belongs – they became a memory still in search of itself.

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Translated from the Arabic by Sam Wilder.
Thank you to Amal Issa for additional editing.

1
Elias Khoury, “The Bulldozers of Memory and the Ruins of the Future,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, May 2, 1992.

2
An-Nahar is a major daily newspaper is Lebanon. The cultural supplement, which was sometimes also called *Mulhaq An-Nahar* (An-Nahar supplement), is now dissolved. Founded by poet and journalist Ounsi Al Hajj in 1964, it was suspended during the Lebanese Civil War and then resumed by the writer and novelist Elias Khoury in 1992.

3
Khoury, “Bulldozers of Memory.”

4
Khoury, “Bulldozers of Memory.”

5
“Alternative Vision for the Reconstruction of Beirut,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, May 2, 1992.

6
In 1991, the Lebanese government resolved to reconstruct Beirut’s central district through the framework of a public-private real estate company. However, the company itself (named Solidere) wasn’t founded until May 1994, during Hariri’s first term as prime minister. The creation of Solidere, which embodied Hariri’s vision for Beirut, is considered one of his main accomplishments, despite the many controversies that accompanied its establishment, especially its disconnection from the social fabric of the city and its expropriation of private property in return for company shares. After Hariri’s assassination in 2005, his tomb was erected on Solidere land, in a symbolic gesture indicating the intimate connection between the man and the company.

7
Khoury, “Bulldozers of Memory.”

8
Elias Khoury, “Memory Wars,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, January 25, 1997.

9
Khoury, “Memory Wars.”

10
The Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir* was founded in 1974, shortly before the Civil War, and was known for its support of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), before it later became close to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. The newspaper was dissolved in 2016.

11
“Rights-holders” refers to those whose property was being forfeited in return for (often undervalued) shares in Solidere.

12
Talal Salman, “Goodbye Beirut,” *As-Safir*, September 21, 1994.

13
Yehia Jaber, “The Poet-Youths and Their War Memories: From the Barricades of War to the Barricades of Poetry,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, March 14, 1992.

14
Youssef Bazzi, “From the Beirut Stage to Beirut Theater: The Prison of Sand and Castles of Sand,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, April 8, 1995.

15
Roger Assaf, “Against Forgetting,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, May 16, 1992.

16
Elias Khoury, “In Defense of the War,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, April 14, 2000.

17
A coalition of right-wing Christian parties and personalities that was established in 1976 amidst the Lebanese Civil War.

18
Bilal Khbeiz, Jana Nasrallah, and Fadi El Tofeili, “The Left in Lebanon: Has it Earned its Name?,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, October 10, 1998.

19
“The Rubble of the Red House and the Heritage Slaughterhouse,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, May 11, 1996.

20
Khbeiz, Nasrallah, and El Tofeili, “The Left in Lebanon.”

21
Khoury, “Memory Wars.”

22
Elias Khoury, “The Intellectual and the Dog,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, March 4, 2000.

23
Bilal Khbeiz, “The Statements of Intellectuals Against the Extension: Coronation of Failures or Facilitation of Hope?,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, December 2, 1995.

24
Elias Khoury, “Letter to Georges Corm,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, September 9, 2000. The Taif Agreement, which was reached by Lebanese deputies in Al Taif in Saudi Arabia, brought an end to the Lebanese Civil War.

25
Elias Khoury, “Longing, Nostalgia, and Other Names,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, March 15, 1997.

26
Georges Corm, “Letter to my Friend Elias Khoury,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, February 10, 2001.

27
The play is named after landmark public garden, one of Beirut’s remaining few. The play refers to an incident in 1983 when Ibrahim Tarraf, a law student, was executed by the first public hanging in twenty years, in Sanayeh Garden. Tarraf had murdered his landlady and her son, chopped them up, and dumped bags containing their remains in the garden.

28
Rabih Mroué, Lina Saneh, Walid Sadek, and Tony Chakar, “The Sanayeh Garden: Criticism of the Regime or Re-production of Power?,” *Al-Mulḥaq*, May 24, 1997.